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THE GROUND OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE¹

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Whatever authority the Bible has, is no actual authority to men until it is recognized as such. In order to be recognized, its true character must be known. This character is discerned intellectually through critical examination, and spiritually through devout meditation on it. Criticism which aims to ascertain the exact history and real characteristics of the Bible is indispensable to the best understanding and usefulness of it.

Strictly speaking, the Bible is not our main and ultimate authority. That authority for the Christian is Jesus Christ. Even he is no authority to a man till he is seen to bear the marks of it. But once accepted he is supreme over our faith.

In what sense the Bible—especially the New Testament—is an authority may be best seen by putting ourselves back to the time of the first preaching of the gospel. There was then, and for a generation longer, no New Testament. Men believed on the ground of the oral testimony of the apostles and disciples of Christ. Conceivably the gospel might have been propagated till now in that way. It is still largely taught orally rather than by means of the Bible.

The New Testament is the written deposit of the oral teaching of the apostles. Whatever reason was first had for believing in Christ on the ground of apostolic testimony we have now for accepting the New Testament as the truthful record of the gospel of salvation.

Christian experience and the Christian Scriptures come from the same source—from Christ himself. Therefore in general they cannot disagree. The Christian consciousness is sometimes spoken of as a rival authority to the Bible. This is impossible. If one's judgment rejects the New Testament in its general and characteristic

¹ A report of an extemporaneous address delivered at the meeting of the American Bible League, December 8, 1904.

features, that judgment cannot be a Christian judgment. Doubts may be raised concerning minor or incidental features of the Bible, but those can be justified to the Christian mind only when these features are shown to conflict with the general tenor of the Scriptures. The general authenticity of the New Testament must be assumed as impregnable. It must be regarded as our most original and trustworthy source of information concerning Christ and his gospel. It must be maintained as the standard of faith; else we have no standard.

Christian criticism consequently can never result in a general discrediting of the Christian Scriptures. It has already done very much by way of vindicating their general authenticity against the assaults of skeptics. Its function is to interpret their meaning; to distinguish in them between the fundamental and the incidental, between the permanent and the transient; and to expose erroneous conceptions concerning them, whether Christian or non-Christian.

The authority of the Bible does not depend on proving its infallibility. Trying to prove its absolute inerrancy is nearly as harmful as trying to prove its general fallibility. What is to be insisted on is the supreme authority of Christ. The Scriptures are to be studied in order the better to learn what he is, and what he requires of us.